

[Obeah]

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER ELLIS WILLIAMS

ADDRESS 852 St. Nicholas Ave. NYC

DATE October 10, 1938

SUBJECT CRAWFORD'S STORY: OBEAH

1. Date and time of interview October 9 and 18, 1938
2. Place of interview 447 W. 152nd St. NYC
3. Name and address of informant Mr. Crawford 447 W. 152nd. St. NYC
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

One of the better houses on "Sugar Hill" for colored occupants (Harlem). Five-story walk-up; clean, and apparently well-managed. Apartment was clean with evidence of being

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freshly painted. Furniture in disarray due to intended trip of informant to the West Indies. Furnishings apparently new and modernistic.

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NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER ELLIS WILLIAMS

ADDRESS 852 St. Nicholas Ave. NYC

DATE October 10, 1938

SUBJECT CRAWFORD'S STORY: OBEAH

1. Ancestry
2. Place and date of birth Trinidad, West Indies
3. Family None
4. Places lived in, with dates
5. Education with dates Public School and St. Mary's College, Trinidad; City College, New York City.
6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

Newspaper correspondent, business man, amateur radio operator.

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7. Special skills and interests

8. Community and religious activities

Active member African Methodist Ch.; Police Athletic League and Boy's Clubs

9. Description of informant Tall, fairly well-built, weighs about 180.

10. Other Points gained in interview Informant is good source for other material. Convinced interviewer of his store of knowledge on "Obeah".

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Ellis Williams

ADDRESS 852 St. Nicholas Ave. New York City

DATE October 10, 1938

SUBJECT CRAWFORD'S STORY : OBEAH

Hello ole chap! Hello there! Come on in.

What in blazes brings you over. It has been a blasted long time since I last saw you. What's new and what have you been doing? (The interviewer looks around the room) Please excuse the appearance of the apartment. I am sailing soon you know.

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Sailing to Europe?

Hell no! Back to the "Land of the Humming Bird.

When do you sail?

In a fortnight or so.

What line are you using, [?] or C. N. S. ([?] and the Canadian National Steamship lines are the regular service lines to the West Indies.)

No! No! (with emphasis) Dutch Line [?].

Why Dutch Line?

Because I am blasted sick of the British. After last week's happenings who wouldn't be thoroughly disgusted. At this moment "Bill" (interviewer's nickname) I do not know how you feel but I regret been born British. Chamberlain's policy has been one continuous blunder. It was a horrible shame for the "Limey's" (Opprobrious term for the English) to, have fed the brave Czecks to the two holdup men of Europe. (Referring to Hitler and Mussolin.)

Wasn't Ethiopia fed too? So what? Are you not glad that you are in America where "Peace" prevails?

"Bill", there is no such thing as "Peace". 'Tis true we are not at war like other nations in Europe and the Orient but we too have our troubles at home. We have the war of the A. P. of L. against the C. I. O.; we have the war of the liberals against the reactionaries; we have the war of whites against the blacks and we have the war of class against class. (He excuses himself and returns with a tray and set-up) What are you drinking?

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Oh! not particular. Scotch and soda? Gee! but I forgot my charger is already packed. Rye or falernum. (Falernum is a drink made only in the West Indies. It is a cordial.)

Falernum I'll have. Don't be so darn sentimental. You know you'd rather scotch. I'll run out and get some soda. Make yourself at home. Turn on the radio. Gabriel Heatter will be on in a few minutes. I'll dial the station. There are cigarettes in the case and I will be back in a jiffy.

My host has left and I am recording what has transpired so far. After several minutes the bell rings and I push to open the door. There is no one present. I continue to write. It is pretty difficult with the radio going. The bell rings again and I open the door to find my host.

I suppose you had a hard time finding the buzzer? It is in the kitchen. Some houses have theirs in the parlor or in the 3 hall.

Yes, I heard the bell and went to the door, but there was no one present so I decided it was an accidental ring by someone.

Often times I have been disturbed in the midst of work by someone trying to get in to see someone else. It is common practice around here. He mixes two drinks, offers me one and flop down in an arm chair and exclaims "we were on the situation in Europe and at home". (Interviewer is anxious to get down to business and get the reason for his visit over.) Talking about war, I will be at war with my supervisor if I don't get some copy for him on folk lore on Monday.

Did you say folklore? Well, if I am not folklore it-self-skippy.* I could give you oodles of it but there is a but. I sail soon for home and I am busy as a bee packing and straightening out my affairs. (Have another drink? He proceeds to mix another talking at the same time.) Anyway as one good "lorian" to another I'll give you some stuff but what are you doing to do with it?

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Turn it in to my supervisor who in will edit and compile some in book form which will serve generations yet unborn as a document rich in historical value.

Are the identities of persons giving information to be made public?

To be truthful, I am not sure but even if it were, there is nothing for one to be ashamed off. Persons giving information are contributing in no small way to history making. (My host loads his pipe and again settles in his seat. Bill have a cigarette?

* skippy -Colloquial expression—"I know all about it"

**lorian—Meaning trinidadian

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Thanks. Here is a light? (We are both smoking.)

Bill, what do you wish to write on? Obeah I retorted. Is obeah folklore? Certainly it is. I should say it is. Well, hell, you ought to know as much about it as I do. So true, but I rather use what you know about it. Hells bells! To anyone else I'd be scared a tiff to give them any information. Go ahead pop your questions.

To your mind, what is Obeah?

Obeah is one of several cults that are merely religious systems with elaborate and complicated rituals, surpassing I would say in intricacy and symbolism most of the Oriental or European religious systems. It is strictly African. You might not know Bill that the basis for African religion is the unity of the Godhead or Theism. (If you will please speak a little slower, I will be able to get everything) What did you say about the Angels? I repeat, the multiplicity of angels, forces, spirits, beings, and so on does not in anyway clash with the idea of unitarianism. In most of the West Indian Islands today, there exist very vague survivals of obeah which is due largely to the fact of the adoption of Christianity by the

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African. I want to mention also of the Europeans superstition super imposed on him and strange as it might seem even though the European superstition has been forced on him. It is religious customs only which definitely survive. Consequently the "greenies" (meaning unsophisticated peasantry) can now be hardly imposed upon by the obeah trickster unless he incorporates in his bag of tricks a great portion of European or American magic. This will of course include such things as, candles, saints, shrines, bells, books and so on.

Boy, are you getting the stuff? It is rich stuff you know. This is the kind of stuff that I get money for you know. You are the 5 only person I'd give this stuff to free. Come on, let us have another. I am just getting in the mood to spill (he is chuckling) what you folk call folklore. (He mixes another drink and while so doing exclaims I must get some more cubes.) Here is one for you says he? But I would rather try the falernum now. No. It is bad to mix drinks. One could readily see that you are no drinker.

Getting back to obeah. There in a chap Herskovits who claims that the source of inspiration for African obeah or voodoo is unmistakably European. That many of the Negro traits as it pertains to the practice and which many writers think are peculiar to him, are unmistakably a retention of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of Europe, which were imposed upon the African in the West Indies. You know I think he has got something there. Was it Mirabeau when asked whether he believed in magic retorted that it was very effective when given with poisons. Whatever may be the effectiveness of the Africans' knowledge of organic poisons, the fact remains that the obeah man claims a cure for every curse. To make it clear for every harmful effect produced from any cause, there is in the cult or wanga an antidote.

How many wanges do you know about? Six or seven.

Tell me something about the wanges.

Wanges in a great many instances are not unlike what some people call "scarescrows". They are designed especially as guards to protect fruit trees from against the pilferers who

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roam from orchard to orchard at night stealing. If you want a technical answer-write. I will give it to you in literary style. The construction of a wanga is based on an African concept identical with one of the doctrines of Pythagoras, an early Greek philosopher, that is, that the [?] relation of similar forms implies the existence of other and distinct relations.

How is that Bill? Is'nt that puttong on the heat? Listen ole man I trust you will forgive me but I am getting packed, further my mater always hammered it in me to give, yes to give but in little doses. If you are interested as I am sure you must be you will come again. Do not think I am expediting your departure but it is time for the chick to come to help me pack for the storage warehouse.

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(A second interview, on October 18th., 1938)

I see you are back, Bill, much like our friends across the border who got their men.
(Meaning Canadian Mounted Police.) Did you bring me a copy of the last interview?

I did. Here it is.

He reads it aloud. It sounds durn good. Is this copy mine?

So it is.

Thanks. I am going to keep it, but remember I am expecting you to send me a copy of the completed story. I wish also to make clear, Bill, that in the event that it is published I must have a copy free, gratis and for nothing.

If it is at all possible.

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Getting back to my story of Obeah, the idea is seen in many forms of European magic, as apart from symbolism, and to my mind it is a natural though unscientific inference. It is devilishly interesting to see how the islander of the West Indies clings to his wanga in the hope of frightening off the kids—those mischievous brats who in all boyish frivolity rob for the fun of it, mangoes, babanas, alligator pears, cigmet and other fruits.

In a great measure, is he successful with his wanga?

No! emphatically no. While there might be some slight emotional reaction, the more sophisticated kids regard wanga as a fraud and chuckle no end when they observe them nailed to trees, displayed in a prominent place, or suspended in the garden on a pole “shrieking beware.” I once asked a chap who had nothing floating from his garden pole “where his wanga was.” “Ah,” he replied, “this is the best wanga” —pointing to the naked pole. “Them little boys stone down every-body wanga, but when they see my pole without any wanga—they frighten. They don't know where my wanga is.” This bloke had developed a psychological technique to meet the incredulity of the urchins and their contempt for wanga, for he adds mystery for whatever vestige of fear that still lingers.

Tell me something of the Coffin, Cocobay, Uncorked Bottle, Cactus, and other wangas.

The Coffin-Board wanga is what you must mean. It is a terrifying one, as you [?] no doubt must know. It is made from a bit of board from which a coffin has been made. It is draped in black and hoisted on a high pole—a candle might be added to remind you of your funeral service. All through these explanations you will note that the Pythagorean implication is true.

The Cocobay wanga is made from a soft young calabash. If one were to dare trespass, his skin would get all the abrasions of a leper as the young calabash withers and decays. Feathers are stuck in it, but you must be careful that they are not from the body of a Sen

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Sen fowl, for Gede, a human sub-deity, eats this bird. (Sen Sen fowl is a bird that may be relied on to dig up and unearth any obea in one's yard.)

Wangas which very strictly follow the Pythagoran principles are the Prickly Cactus wanga, and the Human Figure. The cactus will grow in an uncomfortable part of your anatomy, if you trespass, and any castigation of the human figure will be felt by the thief in the corresponding places.

One must of necessity be filled with fear if they observe little bundles of earth hanging on trees: they have come from a newly made grave, and if you dare steal from the tree, surely there will be another newly made one.

The Corked Bottle wanga is the most terrible of all the wangas, for the bottle will be sealed and cast into the sea. What avail it then to take a cathartic? Epsom salt, sonna leaves, herb teas, castor, or even croton oil, cannot help you. The corked bottle is proof against 9 all of these, and so will you be. Your belly will continue to enlarge until it pleases the [?] offended party to retrieve and uncork the bottle.

And to all who might read the story, and who might wish to travel through the West Indies, I attest this solemn warning: be sure to take a large supply of aperients, for every constipated person is a suspect. Laugh it off if you may. You may argue all the scientific findings you can, but wanga will be the only verdict.

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And now, since you have got me started, I am going to do oodles of research when I get home—and if you wish me to, I will send you the data if you will pay for the Air-mail.

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FORM D Extra Comment

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Ellis Williams

ADDRESS 852 St. Nicholas Ave. NYC

DATE October 10, 1938

SUBJECT CRAWFORD'S STORY: OBEAH

Webster's Int. Dictionary reference to "Obeah" —

OBEAH — a religion probably of Ashanti origin; practiced among Negroes in British West Indies; characterized by the use of sorcery and magic rituals, often attended by grave or fatal consequences . . . Obeah doctors are adept in the use of poisonous herbs, ground glass and the like and in the production and fostering of fear, . . . "To bewitch or influence by the practice of obeah".